Pakistan to take final call on T20 World Cup participation by next week

PCB chief says decision could come by Friday, or next week

By Syed Irfan Raza and Mohammad Yaqoob

ISLAMABAD/LAHORE: Pakistan is expected to make a final decision by next week, over the cricket team's participation in next month's Twenty20 World Cup, keeping open the possibility of a boycott over Bangladesh's withdrawal.

A decision was expected on Monday, when Interior Minister and Pakistan Cricket Board chairman Mohsin Naqvi called on Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif.

However, no decision was announced after the meeting, and Naqvi instead issued a statement on X, saying the "final decision will be taken either on Friday or next Monday".

Naqvi had thrown the team's participation into doubt on Saturday, saying Pakistan could pull out after the International Cricket Council replaced Bangladesh in the tournament. He had said then that he was waiting for the prime minister to return from abroad before coming to a decision.

According to the PM Office's media team, Naqvi called on the prime minister on Monday and apprised the premier on the "International Cricket Council matter".

A source in the PM Office told *Dawn* that even PM's media team was not informed about the decision.

A handout issued by the PMO, said: "During the meeting, he [interior minister] briefed the prime minister on the recent developments between the ICC and Bangladesh Cricket Board regarding the T20 World Cup."

The PCB chief, meanwhile, stated that he had a "productive" meeting with PM Shehbaz.

"[I] briefed him on the ICC matter, and he directed that we resolve it while keeping all options on the table. It was agreed that the final decision will be taken either on Friday or next Monday," the post read.

Well-informed sources told *Dawn* that Naqvi briefed the prime minister "on the positive and negative impacts of the options that can be adopted to show solidarity with Bangladesh".

"A total boycott of the event is not the top priority, however, Pakistan could forfeit the group match against India to be held on Feb 15," sources added. "For this, solid grounds are available to the PCB, which could avoid any sanctions or penalty on it from the ICC."

Sources pointed to the frosty ties between India and Pakistan, with the two countries having come to the brink of war in May last year.

"Pakistan can say it is following the instructions of the government in not playing against India. In that case, the ICC cannot impose any cash penalty or sanctions on PCB."

ICC replaced Bangladesh with Scotland on Saturday following their refusal to tour India over safety concerns in the wake of soured political relations between the Asian neighbours.

The governing ICC rejected Bangladesh's request to move their matches to tournament co-host Sri Lanka, saying it was not feasible to change the schedule so close to the February 7 start of the tournament.

The BCB has accepted the decision and said it will not be involved in further arbitration over the issue.

"We have accepted the decision of the ICC board," a BCB media official said in a statement. "Since the ICC has said that we cannot go and play or they cannot shift our games to Sri Lanka, in this case we cannot go and play in India. Our position remains the same. We are not going to any separate arbitration or anything here."

Pakistan had backed Bangladesh's stance in Wednesday's ICC Board virtual meeting, saying there was a precedence of relocating India's matches on security fears from Pakistan in last year's Champions Trophy.

Then India, who have not toured Pakistan since 2008, played all their matches in Dubai.

The same option was given to Pakistan who will not tour India and play their World Cup matches in Sri Lanka under an agreement signed last year saying the two countries will play on neutral venues whenever one of them hosts an ICC event.

LAHORE: Pakistan batter Sahibzada Farhan plays a shot during a practice match at the Gaddafi Stadium on Monday. The national team will host Australia for a Twenty20 series starting on Thursday, with all three games to be played in Lahore.—Courtesy PCB

Sinner powers on, Keys exits as heatwave hits Melbourne

MELBOURNE: One champion survived and another succumbed at the Australian Open on Monday as Jannik Sinner reached the quarter-finals after women's holder Madison Keys crashed out at the hands of friend Jessica Pegula as Melbourne braced for forecast 45C heat.

Sinner became the second Italian into the last eight after Lorenzo Musetti battled stifling conditions and beat an injury-hampered Taylor Fritz to set up a last-eight showdown with Novak Djokovic, while Iga Swiatek sent the last Australian out of the women's draw with a 6-0, 6-3 thumping of qualifier Maddison Inglis.

Two days after suffering dramatic cramps in a third round scare against Eliot Spizzirri, Sinner rebounded with 6-1, 6-3, 7-6 (7/2) win over fellow Italian and close friend Luciano Darderi as the heat returned to Melbourne Park.

With the sun having retreated in the late afternoon, the double-defending champion was relieved to play in the shade at Margaret Court Arena on a day when temperatures reached 33C.

"It's definitely a bit different when there is no sun, even if it's quite warm outside still," said Sinner, who booked his ninth successive Grand Slam quarter-final. "It was difficult to put the match away, happy I closed it in three sets. So I felt quite good out there physically. Everything was okay today."

Sinner sent down a bumper 19 aces in the match, and said his hard work had paid off. "Still room to improve but happy how I have come back in the new season," he added.

Sinner will next meet American eighth seed Ben Shelton, who stepped in for the absent Djokovic and overhauled 12th seed Casper Ruud 3-6, 6-4, 6-3, 6-4 in the late match at Rod Laver Arena.

Shelton lost to Sinner in last year's semi-finals, one of a run of eight successive defeats to the Italian.

A year after hoisting the women's trophy with a brilliant win over Aryna Sabalenka, Keys' title defence ended with a 6-3, 6-4 loss to sixth seed Pegula.

Good friends with Pegula, with whom she does a podcast "The Player's Box", Keys promised to honour a pre-match wager by eating a cheese-smothered apple pie.

"A bet is a bet, so I'll do it. I hope it's less gross than I think it's going to be, but we will find out," said Keys, who described herself as proud despite defeat.

Pegula is chasing an elusive Grand Slam title aged 31, her best performance to date reaching the US Open final in 2024.

An erratic Keys made 27 unforced errors to Pegula's 17 and fired down six double faults as her title defence folded.

Pegula reached her fourth quarter-final at Melbourne Park and will meet Amanda Anisimova, who made it four US players in the women's final eight after beating China's Wang Xinyu.

MADISON Keys of the US serves to compatriot Jessica Pegula during their Australian Open fourth-round match on Monday.—AFP

Fourth seed Anisimova, beaten finalist at last year's US Open and Wimbledon, cooled herself off with bags of ice before taming Wang 7-6 (7/4), 6-4.

Second seed Swiatek will face former Wimbledon champion Elena Rybakina in the other quarter-final in the bottom half of the draw, the resurgent Kazakh having blitzed Elise Mertens 6-1, 6-3.

Swiatek demolished home qualifier Inglis as she closes on a first Australian crown, having won all three of the other majors.

Inglis, ranked 168, was in the biggest match of her life after two-time Melbourne champion Naomi Osaka pulled out injured from their third-round meeting.

Just being in the fourth round earned Inglis a life-changing Aus$480,000 (US$330,000) — she plans to buy a toaster and a kettle with the windfall.

MANY BATTLES

After brutal weather caused the suspension of matches on Saturday, temperatures rose sharply again.

Longer matches on Monday had 10-minute breaks in certain circumstances as part of measures to protect player health.

Temperatures are forecast to hit a blistering 45C on Tuesday, meaning matches are likely to be played under roofs on the three courts that have them.

Musetti had revenge on his mind after losing to Fritz at the ATP Finals in November, and the fifth-seeded Italian delivered, winning 6-2, 7-5, 6-4 to reach his first Australian Open quarter-finals.

"Honestly, I feel very proud. I know Taylor very well, we've played many matches, many battles. And last time in Turin he was the winner," Musetti said. "I came here with a different mentality and I think I made one of my best performances."

Musetti's reward is a blockbuster clash against 10-times champion Djokovic, who will be as fresh as he can be after a three-day break.

The Serbian great had a walkover when fourth round opponent Jakub Mensik withdrew with injury.

Djokovic has won nine of their 10 previous meetings, but Musetti said: "I feel ready to try to push him to his maximum."

Fritz also bowed out sore and sorry, saying he had aggravated knee and abdominal issues during his previous win over Stan Wawrinka.

"Today I was feeling it from the get-go," he said.—Agencies

England, Root test Sri Lanka's home ODI success

COLOMBO: Sri Lanka's five-year unbeaten home series ODI run faces its stiffest test on Tuesday, with England levelling the series 1-1 and Joe Root again the key obstacle.

Root has been England's sheet anchor, posting half-centuries in both matches, with his back-to-the-wall 75 in Saturday's second ODI laying the foundation for a five-wicket victory.

"Joe's unbelievable, the way he batted the other night showed his class in these conditions when the pitch is turning," England spinner Liam Dawson told reporters in Colombo on Monday.

"To be that successful and dominate world cricket for the number of years he's played is phenomenal. He's obviously going to go down as one of the greats of the game."

Root has taken the old-school route, at a time when most modern batters try to bludgeon spin into submission by sweeping, reverse-sweeping and going aerial.

He does use the sweep, but he is far from a one-trick pony.

Playing late, using soft hands and milking the bowling for singles, he rotates strike effortlessly, shifting pressure back onto the bowlers.

Sri Lanka know the equation only too well.

"Root has always been a thorn in our flesh and we have seen how, when we dismiss him early, England struggle," captain Charith Asalanka said.

"He holds one end up, builds partnerships and he is England's key, we know that. His experience, with over 22,000 international runs, makes him a huge challenge for us, but we are ready for him in the series decider."

England's growing comfort with spin was underlined in the second ODI.

They rolled out six slow bowling options and sent down 40.3 overs of spin, the most by an England side in ODI history.

Dawson believes that depth could be a trump card with the T20 World Cup looming, which Sri Lanka will co-host with India.

"With the World Cup being in this part of the world, having so many spin options is a good thing for the captain," Dawson said.

"On flatter surfaces, you have to vary your pace and things like that, but in these conditions, you just have to land it in a good spot — and let the pitch do the rest."

The Sri Lanka tour is a dress rehearsal for the World Cup for England.

"This experience of playing here before the World Cup is important for us," Dawson said.

"Hopefully we can win the last game, build some confidence, compete well in the T20 series coming up and head into the World Cup on a high."—AFP

England, SL seal wins at U19 World Cup

HARARE: England extended their unbeaten run at the Under-19 Cricket World Cup with a dominant seven-wicket win over Bangladesh in the Group 2 of the Super Six on Monday.

The result helped England climb to top of Group 2, with six points from three matches as they close in on a semi-final spot.

In Group 1, Afghanistan suffered their first defeat in the competition, losing to Sri Lanka by four wickets.

England bundled out sorry Bangladesh for 136 after being put into field at the Queens Sports Club in Bulawayo with only Rifat Beg (31) and Md Abdullah (25) offering some resistance.

Pacer Sebastian Morgan picked 3-28 while spinner Ralphie Albert and medium pacer Manny Lumsden captured two wickets each.

England mowed down the modest total in 24.1 overs, with seven wickets to spare with Thomas Rew scoring a quickfire 59 not out, marking England's fourth win in a row.

Sri Lanka won the toss and elected to field first in Windhoek, Namibia, before dismissing the Afghans for 193 in 49.5 overs despite opener Osman Sadat's 61. Spinner Viran Chamuditha finished with impressive figures of 2-20.

Afghanistan ensured a difficult chase for Sri Lanka until all-rounder Chamika Heenatigala (22 not out) navigated the team through a nervy final phase, taking them home in 46.5 overs.

The result means Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and West Indies all have four points each in the Super Six. Afghanistan still sit atop Group 1 owing to a superior net run-rate.—Agencies

NA panel directs action on misuse of hockey grounds, forms audit sub-committee

By Kashif Abbasi

ISLAMABAD: A National Assembly panel on Monday directed the Ministry of Inter-Provincial Coordination (IPC) to take action against commercial activities being conducted in hockey grounds across the country.

The directive was issued during a meeting of the National Assembly Standing Committee on IPC, chaired by Member National Assembly Sheikh Aftab Ahmed.

The committee also discussed the ongoing process for the election of the Pakistan Hockey Federation (PHF), which is being conducted through the Pakistan Sports Board's (PSB) election commission.

Officials from the ministry briefed the committee that the PSB and the PHF would jointly form a scrutiny committee to oversee the process. The committee itself suggested that the registration portal of the Sports Board's Election Commission should be reopened to facilitate the process.

When questioned by lawmakers about potential irregularities in club registrations, ministry officials assured them that no fake clubs would be registered.

They explained that club championships had been initiated from every district and that approximately 1,100 clubs would be verified.

Director General PSB Mohammad Yasir Pirzada informed that the committee would set eligibility criteria, allocate marks and ensure mandatory data matching of registered players.

Under the proposed framework, each hockey club will be required to have a president and a secretary, submit registration documents and provide details of its home ground. The scrutiny will be carried out under predefined standards.

The ministry further stated that any grievances would first be addressed by the PHF, with the IPC ministry stepping in to investigate if complaints were not resolved within three days.

A final report on the scrutiny process will be submitted to the committee upon its completion.

Separately, the committee constituted a sub-committee to examine the financial and operational performance of the PSB. The sub-committee will be convened by Dr. Mehreen Razzaq Bhutto, with MNAs Anjum Aqeel Khan and Khawaja Izhar Ul Hassan as members.

Its terms of reference include reviewing the year-wise major achievements of the PSB over the last five financial years, examining development and non-development funds allocated, released and utilised during that period and obtaining details of grants provided to various organisations.

The sub-committee will also investigate annual details of any audit objections from those years that could not be settled through statutory forums, including the reasons for their non-settlement.

The meeting was attended by MNAs Anjum, Sardar Mohammad Yaqoob Khan Nasar (via Zoom), Haji Rasool Bax Chandio, Syeda Shehla Raza, Dr. Mahreen, Izhar Ul Hassan, Babar Nawaz Khan, Aftab Ahmed and Mohammad Idrees. Senior officers from the Ministry of IPC were also present.

White Winter Olympics beckons as snow falls in Italian Alps

ROME: Snow has fallen in the Italian Alps just in time for the start of the Winter Olympics, dispelling fears of artificially-covered tracks winding through lush green mountainsides.

From Bormio, home to the ski mountaineering races, to the Antholz valley where biathletes will tote their rifles, venues have seen intense snowfall less than two weeks before the opening ceremony on February 6, an expert said Monday.

"The snow has arrived," Italian meteorologist Mattia Gussoni told AFP, while pictures of the areas showed white mountain peaks, low-hanging snow clouds, and blanketed fields.

The Milan-Cortina Games, which run from February 6 to 22, will be scattered across the mountains of northern Italy, from alpine skiing in Cortina to freestyle skiing in Livigno.

These resorts — most of which are within the soaring Dolomites — are perched between 1,200 and 1,800 metres (3940 feet and 5900 feet) above sea level, a height which would traditionally guarantee snow.

But with snow cover in the Italian Alps down by half in the past 100 years as the climate warms, organisers feared spring-like conditions.

"In the coming days, especially from tomorrow evening, there will be new and heavy snowfall across the Alps," said Gussoni. "This is excellent news ahead of the opening of the Olympics. At least there will be no shortage of snow at the start of February!" he said.

This does not mean there will be no call for artificial snow for the Games, which is made using cannons and guns which spray water into the cold air, turning it into fine snow.

The international federations that govern skiing and biathlon both require organisers to have snow production equipment on hand, should it be needed.

And the 2026 organising committee has said it plans to make 2.4 million cubic metres of artificial snow, which will require 948,000 cubic metres of water.

But the artificial snow planned will certainly use far less water than that required during the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, when 890,000 cubic metres was used for the alpine skiing site at Yanqing alone. A further 1.9 million cubic metres was needed for all other snow sports, according to Olympic statistics.

Gussoni said it was "a bit too early to say" though whether there would be further snowfall to ensure a white wonderland throughout the Games to the finish line.

"There are still too many weeks to go. The weather conditions are also forecast to be quite changeable during these weeks," he said.—AFP

CORTINA D' AMPEZZO (Italy): A drone view of Stadio Olimpico del Ghiaccio ahead of the Milano Cortina 2026 Winter Olympics on Monday.—Reuters